

Libby

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Subject Missoula Independent: Don't hold your breath

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### **Missoula Independent: Don't hold your breath**

In 2006, the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) finally came clean about the uncertain state of the Libby Superfund Site, admitting that after six years and \$110 million dollars spent on cleanup, they had no way of knowing if the town—contaminated by asbestos after years of mining by W.R. Grace—was clean or safe.

In 2007, investigative reporting by the Independent and others revealed the link between the EPA's questionable efforts in Libby and the agency's response to the 9/11 terrorist attack in Manhattan, where it fudged its standards for asbestos exposure to reassure New Yorkers they were safe.

The federal government has been of two minds concerning asbestos. The U.S. Asbestos School Hazard Detection and Control Act of 1980 declared there is no safe level of exposure to the fiber. But around the same time, according to a New York Times report, the EPA caved to lobbying pressure from W.R. Grace to consider products containing less than one percent asbestos "asbestos free," acquiescing to the industry assertion that asbestos exposure in small doses was safe.

When the EPA initiated cleanup activities in Libby, it held to the standards of the 1980 asbestos act, says Gordon Sullivan, a Libby resident who once served as a liaison between the EPA and the community. But over time, he says, he watched the standards erode.

Now we know why. When the World Trade Center collapsed, the buildings, which were partially fireproofed with Monokote, a W.R. Grace product containing 1 percent Libby asbestos, released asbestos into the air. Despite detecting levels of ambient asbestos as high as 4.5 percent in Manhattan, the EPA told New Yorkers it was safe to breath, because the levels were only slightly above the "safe" level of one percent.

W.R. Grace seized on the EPA's pronouncements to challenge regulators of the Libby cleanup—where asbestos levels often measure less than one percent—fighting proposals to declare a public health emergency and to designate the town as a Superfund site.

Libby got the Superfund designation, but not the health emergency declaration, which could have set a precedent requiring the removal of W.R. Grace manufactured asbestos insulation from an estimated 35 million homes in the United States.

At the same time, the EPA lowered its standards for cleaning Libby homes, and started mouthing the industry line—issuing pamphlets to all Libby residents declaring low-level, short-term exposure to asbestos safe. After revelations about the uncertain effectiveness of the Libby cleanup, the EPA deep-sixed the misleading pamphlets.

In August, Sen. Max Baucus threatened to subpoena documents related to the EPA's decision to refuse the emergency declaration. The EPA coughed up the documents, which are currently under review by the senator's staff.

Meanwhile, arguments in a case pitting New Yorkers against the EPA—with New Yorkers asking for money to take care of people ill from exposure to 9/11 dust and for cleaning the city—began this December.

